



## Exercise 4.2

# Perception Is Reality



A resource professional is a representative of the entire agency. Attitudes that the audience holds about the agency can affect communication, and so too can the attitudes the resource professional might have about the audience or the wildland-urban interface. In addition, speakers may project themselves in ways that prevent or enhance communication.

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to do the following:

1. State how their own attitudes can help or detract from their message.
2. Recognize how perceptions of their agency might help and hinder their message.

**Materials:**

*Fact Sheet 4.1: Communication Basics*  
*Fact Sheet 4.4: The Power of Information*  
*Presentation 4.1*

**Time:** 30 minutes

1. Begin by asking the group how they think their agency is perceived. You might explain that resource management agencies, like any regulatory agency, enjoy a multifaceted persona. Some people will trust the agency and believe it has the best policies, while others see incompetence and big government. **Fact Sheet 4.1: Communication Basics** suggests some elements of communication that affect perceptions (preachy behavior, lack of trust, etc.) and **Presentation 4.1** includes a slide that provides these discussion questions. Jot down suggestions from participants on a board or flip chart.
2. Then ask which of these perceptions will help an audience listen, hear, and trust the message. In addition, ask which are more likely to encourage an audience to listen to the messages with an open mind, and which are likely to turn off an audience. Ask participants what they can do to minimize or silence the harmful perceptions and to encourage and build on the beneficial reactions. List their suggestions. You might hear things such as the following:
  - Don't wear a uniform
  - Take off the hat
  - Smile
  - Listen
3. Introduce the idea that participants' attitudes may also affect the success of their communication activity. Some attitudes may be conveyed to the audience and may invite a variety of per-

ceptions. The first portion of **Fact Sheet 4.4: The Power of Information** suggests that some natural resource professionals can convey beliefs that audiences may not appreciate.

4. Divide the participants into small groups to talk about their own personal attitudes about their jobs and the task of communicating with people. Ask them to focus (just as you demonstrated) on which attitudes and behaviors are helpful and which might get in the way of communication. Ask someone in each group to take notes without identifying who said what. Announce that whatever they say in their small groups will not be attributed to them; they can speak generically about resource professionals, their agencies, interface audiences, etc.
5. When the recorders report from their groups, organize the comments on the chalkboard or flip charts so that you can point out some of these stereotypical characteristics of resource professionals that help and hurt communication.

**Here are some examples of beneficial attitudes and communication techniques:**

- Demonstrating concern for people, plants, and animals
- Wanting to make the world a better place for people and for nature
- Enthusiasm for sharing information
- Expressing similarity with the audience (e.g., at my home . . .)

**Here are examples of typical communication challenges:**

**The reluctant communicator**

- I'm not very interested in what people do or say
- I'd much rather talk to trees than people
- It is easier to talk about what I do than ask people what they do
- I may be perceived as uninformed
- How soon can I be fishing?

**The all-knowing leader**

- I know more than those I'm educating, obviously
- Most people are just ignorant
- My uniform tells the world I'm important
- I can be perceived as arrogant

**The all-responsible authority**

- I need results, and not getting the right results means I'm a failure
- The success of this program depends on me
- It is my job to get people to perform properly
- It is my dream to save this part of the world
- I can be perceived as threatening

## Summary

This exercise gives participants an opportunity to wonder if some of their attitudes could be altered to improve their abilities to communicate with their audiences. An attitude adjustment may clear the way for open, honest, science-based information sharing.